

'Aviary' flies into powerful nest of terror

"Aviary" a multimedia dance work by Sarah Skaggs, Ellen Sebring and Beth Galston at MIT's Media Lab, 20 Ames St., Cambridge, last night and tonight.

By MAGGIE LEWIS

"AVIARY" wove an otherworldly tale about a shamanistic swimmer in California and an evil blond boy crossing the Arctic Ocean in a ship who approach each other in their thoughts. Both characters were so powerful, their voyage seemed menacing from the start. But it was hard to know who was in danger until the end. When they actually met on a street, it was subtly terrifying.

"Aviary" was put together by video artist and composer Ellen Sebring, sculptor Beth Galston and dancer Sarah Skaggs. A large suspended screen showed video images of the boy, the woman, fire, ice, water and birds in an aviary. Skaggs swooped and dived like a migrant bird in and out of tubes of sheer fabric which poured light down on the space.

"Thoughts have wings," the narrator said more than once. The blond boy has burned down his village and the swimmer believes her thoughts can influence people. A shaman is a traveller who goes through a parallel world and then returns, the narrator tells us, implying that the swimmer's thoughts have become a bird and crossed the boy's.

Skaggs' presence was strong enough to call attention to her even when there were images on the screen, but she wasn't showy. She covered ground determinedly, bending at the waist and springing upright again, wheeling to take another path. She managed to give the impression that she was moving across rough terrain, not thrashing and swerving in a room.

She didn't act out the story, nor did the video or narration spell it out. The viewer was left to piece it together, which made it more entralling.

"Aviary" is a result of a two-year collaboration. All the elements worked well. Even the sophisticated devices were used with restraint, always at the servitude of the story. It was gripping, subtle and scary.